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AUTHOR	Harris, Henry L.; Coy, Doris R.
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ABSTRACT

One of the most threatening events that causes anxiety in students today is testing. When students develop an extreme fear of performing poorly on an examination, they experience test anxiety. Test anxiety is a major factor contributing to a variety of negative outcomes including psychological distress, academic underachievement, academic failure, and insecurity. Many students have the cognitive ability to do well on exams but may not do so because of high levels of test anxiety. Because of the societal emphasis placed on testing, this could potentially limit their educational and vocational opportunities. This digest highlights characteristics of test anxiety and provides suggestions for administrators, teachers, and school counselors to help students overcome test anxiety. (GCP)

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Helping Students Cope with Test Anxiety

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Henry L. Harris
Doris R. Coy

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
School of Education
201 Ferguson, P.O. Box 26171
Greensboro, NC 27402-6171

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ERIC CASS DIGEST

Helping Students Cope With Test Anxiety

Henry L. Harris & Doris R. Coy

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Anxiety is a basic human emotion consisting of fear and uncertainty that typically appears when an individual perceives an event as being a threat to the ego or self-esteem (Sarason, 1988). In some instances, such as avoiding dangerous situations, anxiety can be helpful. However when taken to extremes, it may produce unwarranted results. One of the most threatening events that causes anxiety in students today is testing. When students develop an extreme fear of performing poorly on an examination, they experience test anxiety. Test anxiety is a major factor contributing to a variety of negative outcomes including psychological distress, academic underachievement, academic failure, and insecurity (Hembree, 1988). Many students have the cognitive ability to do well on exams but may not do so because of high levels of test anxiety. Because of the societal emphasis placed on testing, this could potentially limit their educational and vocational opportunities (Zeidner, 1990).

Characteristics of Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is composed of three major components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Students who experience test anxiety from the cognitive perspective are worriers lacking self-confidence. They may be preoccupied with negative thoughts, doubting their academic ability and intellectual competence (Sarason & Sarason, 1990). Furthermore, they are more likely to overemphasize the potential negative results and feel helpless when in testing situations (Zeidner, 1998). Some students may feel the need to answer every question on the test correctly. When this does not occur they may think of themselves as being incompetent, thus fueling negative thoughts such as, "I knew I was not going to pass this test," "I know I am going to make a poor grade," or "Everyone knows I am not smart." In order for students to have the best opportunity for academic success, negative thinking must be minimized and controlled.

From the affective perspective, test anxiety causes some students to experience physiological reactions such as increased heart rate, feeling nauseated, frequent urination, increased perspiration, cold hands, dry mouth, and muscle spasms (Zeidner, 1998). These reactions may be present before, during, and even after the test is completed. In conjunction with the physiological reactions, emotions such as worry, fear of failure, and panic may be present. When students are not able to control their emotions, they may experience higher levels of stress, thereby making it more difficult for them to concentrate.

Test-anxious students express anxiety behaviorally by procrastinating and having inefficient study and test-taking skills. Zeidner (1998) contends that test-anxious students have a more difficult time interpreting information and organizing it into larger patterns of meaning. In addition, some students may physically feel tired or exhausted during test administration because they do not have a healthy diet, have poor sleeping habits, and fail to routinely exercise.

Suggestions to Help Students Overcome Test Anxiety

There are a number of suggestions that school administrators, teachers, school counselors, and parents may utilize to help students effectively manage test anxiety.

Administrators should:

- attempt to build a strong alliance with parents, students and teachers by explaining to them the importance of testing including potential advantages and disadvantages.
- encourage teachers to teach the curriculum rather than teaching to the test because ideally the test should reflect the curriculum being taught.
- develop school policies on standardized tests that are clear and easily understood.
- consider giving students school-wide practice tests.
- encourage school counselors to address test anxiety with students individually, in small groups, and during classroom guidance lessons.

Teachers should:

- become aware of students' developmental levels and the pressure they may be placing on students prior to test administration.
- teach students successful test-taking strategies that include understanding test time limits, the importance of pacing, and the different type of test formats (e.g. multiple choice, essay, fill in the blank).
- consider designing some classroom tests using the standardized test format during the school year.
- help students understand test ceilings and provide information on whether or not they will be penalized for incorrect responses. If points are deducted for incorrect responses students should be informed to leave items blank (Sycamore & Corey, 1990).
- address test anxiety in class by exploring students' concerns and, if necessary, meet with the school counselor and parents of identified students to confront this issue.

School counselors should:

- collaborate with school officials to identify students experiencing test anxiety.
- conduct classroom guidance topics on test anxiety, test-taking strategies, and effective study skills, and consult with teachers.
- practice different forms of relaxation techniques with students and provide them with the cognitive tools to defeat the negative self-talk they may experience before, during, and after the test.
- offer workshops to parents focusing on ways they may help their children reduce test anxiety.

- meet with students experiencing test anxiety individually or in small groups to address this issue in more detail.
- seek out students who have successfully defeated test anxiety and have them speak or partner with other students to share their experience (Wilkinson, 1990).
- be aware of the developmental levels of students and recognize when test anxiety is out of control, because more serious anxiety-related problems could be present.

Parents should:

- make sure their children attend school regularly.
- create and maintain a home environment that will help their children be well rested during regular school days and during the week of testing.
- evaluate their children's academic progress over a period of time rather than on one single test score.
- talk with their children and encourage them to do their best.
- be proactive, contact school officials if they have questions concerning tests results (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).
- encourage their children to maintain a healthy diet and exercise on a regular basis.

Students are encouraged to:

- consistently develop good sleeping habits, especially during the week of the test, and maintain a healthy diet and exercise regularly.
- avoid cramming, develop good study habits and good test taking skills.
- wear comfortable clothes during the exam and maintain a comfortable and relaxed body posture during the test.
- be aware of time allotted for the test, read directions carefully, and for time management purposes leave questions blank that they are not sure of and attempt to answer them later.
- not compare themselves to other students while taking the test.
- take deep breaths and attempt to regain composure when anxiety levels are high or when negative thoughts are present.

Conclusion

Test anxiety is something that impacts students from all ethnic backgrounds and grade levels. Helping students learn to effectively manage such anxiety is a challenging task that requires a genuine team effort. Students, parents, teachers, school counselors, and school administrators must all find ways to be actively involved in reducing test anxiety. We live in a test-taking society and when students are anxious during tests, they are less likely to perform up to their academic potential.

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Henry L. Harris, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Counseling, Development, & Higher Education at the University of North Texas.

Doris Rhea Coy, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Counseling, Development, & Higher Education at the University of North Texas.

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